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the temptation of **BROTHER THOMAS**

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The Temptation of Brother Thomas: A Stop-Motion Animated Short Film

by J. Stephan Leeper

INTRODUCTION

When Joe Ricke asked earlier this spring and if I would present my film-in-progress at the C. S. Lewis and Friends Colloquium, I was at once excited and confused. Excited to present the film I've been developing for over a decade and confused as to the prospects of presenting an unfinished children's film at a scholarly gathering.

The excited part of me wanted to share how much I've been influenced by C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy Sayers, and J. R. R. Tolkien. How as a young artist and storyteller these authors help to shape, inspire and encourage me to reach for stories with lasting qualities. Stories that were grounded in some sense of faith or mystery. The confused part was wondering how these influences would even remotely surface in an unfinished animated film with no dialogue and only a handful of shots completed. To put it bluntly, presenting an unfinished animated film to an audience of non-animator/artists can be tricky business.

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I imagined I would begin my presentation with an apologetic as to why and how children's media was a viable art form deserving a level of critical recognition that it seldom receives. From there I would attempt to place my work in context with important children's authors, illustrators and film makers. Fortunately for everyone involved the presentation times were limited so instead I chose to stick with the essentials. In the end I simply told my story accompanied by storyboards, a handful of finished shots and some of the beautiful artwork that's been created in the design stages of the film. What I wasn't prepared for was the response I received from the audience. Clearly I was presenting to an audience ready and willing to be moved by a simple story. I was humbled by their generous response.

Since the story of Br. Thomas is best presented as imagery rather than text I chose not to publish the narrative for this article. Instead I've included a description of the themes, elements (and in some cases) mechanics of the film that will hopefully communicate the heart and scope of the project.

You can also go to www.brotherthomasfilm.com to see how The Temptation of Br. Thomas is progressing or visit our FB page at www.facebook.com/BrotherThomasFilm. For a look at our 2016 teaser you can go to www.vimeo.com/brotherthomas

ABSTRACT

The Temptation of Br. Thomas is a short animated film that celebrates beauty and examines our preconceptions of what we consider sacred. Thomas Aquinas serves both as namesake to the central character and an inspiration to the ideas put forth in the film. The Temptation of Brother Thomas draws from the rich legacy of art within the Western Church while it challenges the modern assumption that true art needs to be cut loose from orthodox faith in order to flourish. True to Aquinas' writings, it also challenges contemporary religious notions that art and beauty are somehow superfluous to a life marked by faith.

The Temptation of Brother Thomas claims the goodness of creation and beauty as an invitation to celebrate the Sacred wherever we may find it.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Story Premise: What if a monk found himself so taken with the wonders of the *created* order that he could never fully focus on the duties of his *religious* order? And what if these distractions cast a new and purifying light on his sacred calling?

Theme: *When one sees creation through the eyes of wonder the ordinary is revealed as sacred, and the sacred becomes renewed.*

Plot Synopsis: Brother Thomas is a monk whose day job is to illuminate Scripture and yet his passion is for landscapes. Each morning he makes his way to the abbey and finds the world filled with distractions. His “tempter,” in the form of a brilliant blue dragonfly, keeps Thomas’ head spinning just long enough to coax him off the beaten path and into a world rich with wonder, subtle mystery, and breathtaking beauty.

Spiritual/Philosophical Inspiration: Thomas Aquinas serves as model and namesake for Br. Thomas, the film’s central character. The richness of ancient Church imagery provides both a visual backdrop and thematic baseline for this story to be told. *The Temptation of Brother Thomas* pays homage to the role Western Christianity has played in art history and is a challenge to the kind of religiosity that would separate the created order from its divine author. G. K. Chesterton describes Thomas Aquinas as a theological defender of the arts, the sciences, and the humanities recognizing them as a means to faith and not an obstacle.

(Aquinas) reconciled religion with reason, (and) expanded it towards experimental science. . . . (He) insisted that the senses were the windows of the soul and that reason had a divine right to feed upon facts, and that it was the business of Faith to digest the strong meat of the toughest and most practical of pagan philosophies. . . . St. Thomas was . . . taking the lower road when he walked in the steps of Aristotle. So was God, when He worked in the workshop of Joseph.¹

Formal Issues: The physical world that Br. Thomas inhabits is represented by three dimensional stop-motion sets and fabricated puppets, while the two dimensional stained-glass of the scriptorium serves as an icon, or window allowing us a glimpse into the spiritual world where Mary, the Christ-child and the Apostles reside.

1 *Saint Thomas Aquinas; The Dumb Ox* (New York, New York: Doubleday. Reprinted 1956), pp.13, 22

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There is a scene in the film where the stained glass Christ-child reaches out with his hand and coos after the stop-motion dragonfly and for a moment these two worlds almost collide. There is a Celtic tradition that refers to *Thin Spaces* where the physical and the spiritual world come close enough to touch.

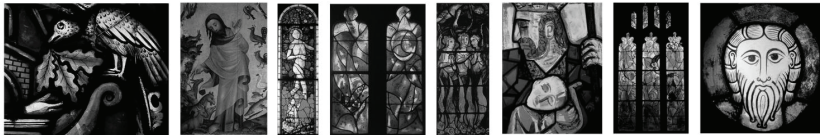
Aesthetic/Historical Elements: This film pays homage to many of the great aspects of Western Art and acknowledges the church as their rightful steward in the following forms:

1. Illuminated Manuscripts: Br. Thomas by trade illuminates manuscripts magnifying the light of the four Gospels through images created on the very pages that the words are recorded, elevating the letters themselves into fantastic works of beauty.



Inspirational Illuminated Manuscripts

2. Stained Glass: Mary and the Christ child, flanked by the Apostles, are enclosed in their stained glass niches from where they watch closely as events transpire. Ultimately it is the light that cascades through these windows that transforms Brother Thomas' world and the scriptorium where he works.



Inspirational Stained Glass and Gothic Imagery

3. Architecture and Statuary: At first the grandness of design and sheer weight of the Cathedral's beauty make Brother Thomas feel small and inadequate. The statues of the church fathers cast long shadows on Thomas, their history and somber demeanor are more than he can bear. Yet as the film unfolds we find the Cathedral is strangely responsive to Thomas's contributions, which in the end is transformative.



Inspirational Architecture and Sculpture

4. Music: For the score of the film I will use some variation of St. Frances' *Il Cantico delle Creature* and musical patterns from the hymn that it inspired *All Creatures of Our God and King*.

Mixed Media: A combination of animation techniques will be utilized to execute this film stop-motion puppetry, traditionally drawn, 3D computer and the latest in 3D print technology.



Br. Thomas Production Images: A Variety of Media

1. Stop-motion Animation will be the main medium of this film. Miniature sets will be constructed for the three-dimensional world while Thomas and the animals will all be physical puppets.

2. 3D Printing aided by 3D animation tools will be used to give Br. Thomas a full range of expression.

3. Digital 2D/Motion Graphics will be used to animate the stained glass world of the Saints.

4. Digital 3D/Computer Graphics will be used to animate the dragonfly.

5. Traditional Drawn Animation will be used to bring life to Br. Thomas' Illuminated Manuscripts.

Intended Audience: *The Temptation of Br. Thomas* is a children's story about a simple-hearted monk remaining faithful and attentive to his circumstances and his calling. While this story grows explicitly out of my own journey and faith tradition I have often found that regardless of spiritual affiliation, this is a story that resonates with all people who value beauty and who gratefully acknowledge creation as a thing to be cherished.

As a short film *The Temptation of Brother Thomas* will be viewed by audiences all over the world through animation festivals and on-line distribution. Eventually we will publish an interactive digital storybook accompanied by targeted curricula. With age-appropriate materials *The Temptation of Br. Thomas* could serve as a guide to the arts for children's ministry or even a catalyst for discussion in adult study groups.

Design and Production Team

There are a number of talented artists and professionals that have joined the Brother Thomas project over the last five years and more to come as we gain funding. Their contribution promises a level of excellence for *The Temptation of Brother Thomas* that previously I could have only imagined. The opportunity to work in such company humbles me daily, challenges me and continues to be a tremendous pleasure.



Media Professionals and Industry Veterans

Steve Leeper: Creator, Director, Production and Story Artist.

“The films that I make draw heavily from my fascination with children’s literature and religious faith. As a storyteller the themes that emerge in my work revolve around questions of self-discovery, creativity and belief.”

Steve has worked as a Stop-motion animator, model maker, 3D layout artist/supervisor and cameraman. Client list includes Big Idea/Veggie-ables, Cap’n Crunch, Chicago Tribune, Fruit of the Loom, Illinois Lottery and Kroger Market.

Steve helped to build the Digital Media Arts department at Huntington University where he now the Director of Animation teaching classes in storyboarding, stop motion animation and media engagement.

Michael Spooner: Art Direction and Visual Development

Michael has worked in animation for over thirty years from as far back as “*Masters of the Universe*,” to “*Chip’n Dale Adventures*,” right up through Disney’s “*Treasure Planet*,” “*The Jonah Movie*” and Sony Picture’s new 3D “*Popeye*” film.

Tom Gasek: Director of Animation

Tom is a veteran stop-motion animator excelling in high-level character performance. Tom has worked on “*Wallace and Gromit*,” “*Chicken Run*,” and “*Coraline*” (just to mention a few). He has recently published “*Frame by Frame Stop Motion*” a definitive guide on the art of stop-frame animation. Tom teaches in the School of Film and Animation at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Tom’s most recent film “*Ain’t No Fish*” is currently enjoying exposure on the international festival circuit.

Proceedings from the Francis White Ewbank Colloquium

Paul Nethercott: Producer

Paul's films have screened at dozens of festivals internationally and won numerous awards. His film *Jitensha (Hidden Beauty)* won the Vision Award for Best Short Film at Heartland Film Festival and was an official selection at the Venice film. Besides acting as Producer on the *Brother Thomas* project, Paul is currently developing *Thin Places*, a documentary/VR experience capturing the power and beauty of Europe's grand cathedral tradition.

Rich Schiller: Sr. Model Maker/Cathedral Builder

Rich's expertise in dimensional model making and his exquisite attention to detail have made him the most sought after Model Maker in Chicago. Rich has created custom models and props for print and video spots for Absolut Vodka, Disney, Quaker Oats, Nestle, McDonald's, Campbell's Soup, Kelloggs . . . to name just a few.

Jeff Jacoby: Sound Designer

Jeff actively practices sound art, sound design, writing, directing and radio production. He has received an Emmy, two Emmy nominations, two Benjamin Franklin's and a host of other awards. His work has been heard on PBS, NPR, and commercial venues, as well as in festivals and art galleries across the country. Jeff is an Associate Professor of Audio & Radio at San Francisco State University.

Kurt Heinecke: *Composer*

Kurt has been the creator of the sound that has defined the world-famous *VeggieTales* and *3-2-1 Penguins* video series. He has composed for over 35 videos and 2 major motion pictures and the recipient of 6 Dove Awards for music production, multiple gold and platinum CDs, and dozens of platinum-selling videos.

Brenda Baumgarter: *Puppet Fabricator*

Brenda is a highly sought after character fabrication artist who has been working in the stop motion industry for well over a decade. Besides being the puppet lead on a television series like *Life's a Zoo* and *Jo Jo's Circus*, Brenda has recently headed up the puppet crew for the soon-to-be released feature film *The Little Prince*. Brenda is currently working as Puppet Fabricator at LAIKA studio in Portland.

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